

## MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE PENELOPIAD*

### Giving Penelope a Voice

Sara Paiva Henriques\*

In 2005, following the publication of *The Penelopiad* as part of the Canongate Myth Series<sup>1</sup>, Margaret Atwood wrote the theatrical script adaptation of her novella, later to be produced and performed in a joint collaboration between The Canadian National Arts Centre and The British Royal Shakespeare Company. A cast composed entirely of actresses first rehearsed the play in the summer of 2007, in the U.K., and later travelled across the Atlantic to perform in Ottawa, during the fall of the same year. Josette Bushell-Mingo and Veronica Tennant both directed and choreographed the script correspondingly, with little stage direction from Atwood herself, which allowed J. Bushell-Mingo to produce and develop the play's action without many restraints.

Four years following its stage debut, the play was back in theatres, first in Vancouver – between October and November of 2011 – and more recently in Toronto, in January of 2012. At the Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage, in Vancouver, British Columbia, the flyer for the *The Penelopiad* featured the quote: “The untold story of the original desperate housewife”, making a clear allusion to a 21<sup>st</sup> century popular culture T.V. series, and Homer's *Odyssey*. Indeed, what is so intrinsically different between these two texts is the point of view from which they are told: while the original version of Odysseus' myth renders a predominantly male gaze upon the events comprised before, during, and after the hero's departure from and arrival in Ithaca, the 2005 rewriting of this same myth focuses mainly on the feminine

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\* University of Lisbon, Centre for English Studies.

1 As Karen Armstrong underlines in *A Short History of Myth*: “Myths are universal and timeless stories that reflect and shape our lives – they explore our desires, our fears, our longings, and provide narratives that remind us what it means to be human. *The Myths* series brings together some of the world's finest writers, each of whom has retold a myth in a contemporary and memorable way. Authors in the series include: Margaret Atwood, Karen Armstrong, AS Byatt, David Grossman, Milton Hatoum, Natsuo Kirino, Alexander McCall Smith, Tomás Eloy Martínez, Victor Pelevin, Ali Smith, Su Tong, Dubravka Ugresic, Salley Vickers and Jeanette Winterson. The series launched on 21<sup>st</sup> October 2005 and is the most ambitious simultaneous worldwide publication ever undertaken.” *The Myths*. Web. Apr. 2012. <<http://www.themyths.co.uk/>>.

perspective. It should be no coincidence, then, that Atwood chose Penelope and her twelve maids as the main characters for *The Penelopiad*<sup>2</sup>.

In this essay, I propose to study the way in which a narrative told from a feminine point of view, and mainly focused on the domesticity of life, can subvert Odysseus' story. Furthermore, the focus on power relations – one of Atwood's recurring themes – takes a detour from what *would* or *could* be its archetypal representation; thus, in *The Penelopiad*, both victim and victimizer roles are constantly put at stake, subverted. In this book, Penelope's passivity facing the death of her twelve maids burdens her with guilt, about which she gives an afterlife account while dwelling in Hades.

It is important to bear in mind that “power-games” and “power-relations” are, indeed, the most pervasive themes in Atwood's novels. Concerning her fictional writing, more significant than a political stance or perspective, are Atwood's observations on life that surrounds her (*i.e.* contemporary Canadian and/or Western issues). All throughout her career, Atwood has strayed away from most of the dogmatic and castrating academic interpretations of concepts such as Post-Colonialism, Multiculturalism or Feminism. Regarding the latter topic, and bearing in mind the fact that the vast majority of Atwood's protagonists are, indeed, women, I must quote Atwood in one of her interviews which compose the volume *Waltzing Again: New and Selected Conversations with Margaret Atwood*:

**Jo Brans:** Are you a feminist writer?

**Margaret Atwood:** ‘Feminist’ is now one of the all-purpose words. It really can mean anything from people who think men should be pushed off cliffs to people who think it's OK for women to read and write. All those could be called feminist positions. Thinking that it's OK for women to read and write would be a radically feminist position in Afghanistan. So what do you mean?

**JB:** Let me try again. What I meant [...] was whether you think that you espouse a feminist position or propaganda in your writing.

**MA:** I don't think that any novelist is inherently that kind of a creature. Novelists work from observations of life. A lot of the things that one observes as a novelist looking at life indicate that women are not treated equally. But that comes from observation. It doesn't come from ideology. I started writing in 1956. There wasn't any women's movement during my writing life until 1970. That's fourteen years of writing. Now, on the other hand—and you have to try to define this very clearly—I'm not one of those women who would say, ‘Well, I made it; therefore anybody else should be able to do it, and what are they whining about.’ That's not the point. Nor am I against the Women's Movement. I think it's been a very good thing, and

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2 While studying *The Penelopiad*, as a chiefly Postmodernist novella, and making allusions to a classical epic such as the *Odyssey*, I would like to call attention to Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth in “Time off the Track” where she mentions that:

Postmodern novelists begin their primary task of reformulating temporality by showing readers that such an idea of temporality is a convention and collective act of faith, not a condition of nature. [...] Novelists who simply abandon historical time as a convention, along with all its baggage including pre-eminently the stable individual subject, provide an alternative practice that illuminates as no theory has yet done the limitations of historical time. (Ermarth 30)

I was happy to see it. But it's very different from saying that what you write is embodying somebody's party line. It isn't. (Brans 79-80)

In short, I shall be focusing on some theoretically questions concerning *The Penelopiad*: why did Margaret Atwood choose to give Penelope a voice and, additionally, a voice to the twelve maids? What is there to be found behind the curtain of domesticity and the way in which this story is retold? How does a deconstruction of the original classical myth help to unveil this curtain and its silencing power over the feminine voice?<sup>3</sup>

Throughout *The Penelopiad*'s narrative, the reader is presented with a new perspective on Penelope's life, told in the first person, after her death. In fact, Penelope is telling her story from Hades, in a "[...] state of bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness [...]" (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 1). It's an all-knowing Penelope who sees everything clearly and knows everything undoubtedly, although she is quick to inform the reader of the burden of knowledge and the power of words: "I've learned some things I would rather not know, as one does when listening at windows or opening other people's letters. You think you'd like to read minds? Think again." (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 1). This elusive new Penelope reminisces over the events that happened as told by Homer in the *Odyssey*, Hades, Odysseus, Helen, and her relationship with her parents. Penelope's story is constantly interrupted by the choir of twelve maids (often written as songs or ballads, laments and other literary genres), questioning Penelope's behavior towards her maids during Odysseus' absence and, by the end of the story, the hanging of the maids by Penelope's son, Telemachus, which she does not prevent from happening.

It is safe to say, then, that one can find two distinct differences in this retelling of the *Odyssey*: the first one relates to the feminine power in this narrative (which consequently brings forward important gender related issues in literature); the second has to do with the binary "victim and victimizer," a recurring theme in Atwood's writing. The reader is therefore faced with two different types of subversions; in the introduction to *The Penelopiad*, Atwood writes:

[...] Homer's *Odyssey* is not the only version of the story. Mythic material was originally oral, and also local – a myth would be told one way in one place and quite differently in another. I have drawn on material other than the *Odyssey*, especially for the details of Penelope's parentage, her early life and marriage, and the scandalous rumours circulating about her.

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3 Canadian literary theorist Northrop Frye has written extensively on the importance of myths as metaphors in the construction of Western canonic literature:  
[...] the reciting of the myth is part of a ritual which, so to speak, epiphanizes or makes present the myth, that is, repeats the original assumed event in the present. [...]  
[...] myth is inseparable from another verbal phenomenon, the metaphor [...].  
Anything that proposes to become a significant part of human consciousness today will have to use the same kind of mythical *koine*, narratives with a verbal shape that can inform other arts and sciences as well, and draw them together in a unity of thought and action. (Frye 7-17)

I've chosen to give the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids. The maids form a chanting and singing chorus which focuses on two questions that must pose themselves after any close reading of the *Odyssey*: what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to? The story told in the *Odyssey* doesn't hold water: there are too many inconsistencies. I've always been haunted by the hanged maids; and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself. (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* xx-xxi)

Examining the patterns observed in centuries past may lead one to revise their thinking regarding the literary tradition of myths – oral or written – and, accordingly, the question of gender subversion and gender roles. Karen Armstrong wrote the first book of the Canongate Myth Series, *A Short History of Myth*. In this introductory rendition of mythology, Armstrong claims that myths are as intrinsic to human nature as the need to understand identity and the universe, and thus, both perceptions are intertwined: “[...] human beings fall easily into despair, and from the very beginning we invented stories that enabled us to place our lives in a larger setting, that revealed an underlying pattern, and gave us a sense that, against all the depressing and chaotic evidence to the contrary, life had meaning and value” (Armstrong 2). She further claims that, “[m]yth is about the unknown; it is about that for which initially we have no words” (Armstrong 4).

As far as Atwood's retelling of the Odysseus myth goes, the patterns and meanings which Armstrong underlines as being a fundamental part of mythology are deliberately subverted and dismantled. Moreover, the state of wordlessness and silence that women were reduced to, in classical mythology, is negotiated through the literary space in which Penelope and the twelve maids inhabit in *The Penelopiad*. It is, indeed, this search for a deeper meaning, a full understanding of life and the universe through symbols and god-like worlds, the supernatural, and entities which would necessarily be too far away from human behavior to be attainable, that Atwood aims to revise and revisit.

Throughout Western history, the growth and importance of written literature and the passage from a ritualistic and sacred practice to a secular one gave way to a mythological narrative that served as the basis for a better understanding of the unknown, setting the foundations of our common identity. The mythological world was lived between the real and the unreal, the truth and the imaginary, which eventually became all that cannot actually exist. Even with the birth and development of other humanistic sciences, such as philosophy and anthropology, the imaginary realm of mythology stood firm as the foundation for much of our Western society's collective memory. It is no coincidence, then, that we refer to the Greek myths as the cradle of Western literature.

Returning to the idea of the feminine point of view as the preponderant theme in Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, let us now briefly contextualize Homer's *Odyssey* as a predominantly male narrative. Leaving the domesticity of home (*oikos*: “house” and “household”), Odysseus travels a grand exotic journey, during which he encounters several mythical creatures and worlds, and must face a great many adversities. In

Homer's *Odyssey*, little is known about Penelope's thoughts, and the main aspects of her character which are underlined in this narrative are her patience and faithfulness towards her husband: we can assume, then, that she is an ingenious and clever woman who waited twenty years for the return of her husband, while weaving a shroud and casting potential Suitors away. Penelope's voice is undoubtedly rather limited – she is confined to the space of the house, family and domestic chores.

That is not to say there are no feminine presences in Homeric works – while they do exist and can be found in such narratives, the truth is that those roles were mainly suited for goddesses or mythological female beings and/or entities. As A.J. Graham writes in the introduction to *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*: "If we include the goddesses and semi-divine women, the *Odyssey* presents a great panorama of womanhood" (Graham 3).

What we observe in these classical works, therefore, is the reflection of a predominantly patriarchal society. Although it can be argued that the historical account of these portrayals' can be fictionalized, as Graham underlines in his defense of literature as society's mirror, "[...] the poem is a unified work of art, composed by a single poet at a single time. This enables the historian to treat the poem, even though it is primarily a literary work of fiction, as a piece of historical evidence" (Graham 3). Thus, we come to the central point of rewriting these canonical myths and their binominal point of view as masculine/feminine.

As previously mentioned, in Homer's portrayal of Penelope she is patient and wise in her weaving (or, in other words, the way she is able to manage the *oikos*), and yet hers is a rather silent account: "The central moral decision on which the action of the *Odyssey* turns is Penelope's. She must decide whether to stay in Odysseus' house, continue to guard it, and wait for her husband's return or to marry one of the Suitors" (Foley 93). The retelling of the *Odyssey* by Margaret Atwood, with Penelope in the central stage position, allows for a dissonance that reads between the lines and allows a broader space for understanding what happened at home during Odysseus' absence. Not only does Atwood focus on the feminine, but she also raises important questions and themes, such as the outcome of different story-telling perspectives, the duplicity between gender[s], and the equality of justice (related to class difference, symbolized by the maids' choir). I would argue that Atwood's revision of the *Odyssey* provides a sort of mythological feminine redemption through Penelope's introspection (*i.e.* her voice), the gossip that surrounds her, as well as the overlapping laments of the maids.

Although in *The Penelopiad*, Penelope's voice is assertive and powerful, the meta-narrator is not exempt from envy and remorse. On the one hand, the way in which her marriage to Odysseus was handled gives space to another side of Penelope, and a very insecure one at that. She is the first to say that her cousin, Helen, overshadowed her in every way, and that were it not for Penelope's uncle cheating in finding her a husband, Penelope's destiny would have been quite different<sup>4</sup>:

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4 Atwood makes a point of explaining Penelope's marriage to Odysseus and Helen's marriage to Menelaus, from Penelope's point of view:



Under the old rules only important people had marriages, because only important people had inheritances. All the rest was just copulation of various kinds – rapes or seductions, love affairs or one-night stands, with gods who said they were shepherds or shepherds who said they were gods.

[...] Marriages were for having children, and children were not toys and pets. Children were vehicles for passing things along. These things could be kingdoms, rich wedding gifts, stories, grudges, blood feuds. [...]

Picture me, then, as a clever but not overly beautiful girl of marriageable age, let's say fifteen. Suppose I'm looking out the window of my room [...] down into the courtyard where the contestants are gathering: all those young hopefuls who wish to compete for my hand. [...]

I know it isn't me they're after, not Penelope the Duck. It's only what comes with me – the royal connection, the pile of glittering junk. No man will ever kill himself for love of me. (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 23-29)

This is one of the first moments in Atwood's text in which the reader is confronted by Penelope's version of the story: we realize that Penelope has always been haunted by Helen's presence, and the dichotomy of victim and victimizer is once again questioned through Penelope's resentment and jealousy towards her cousin:

At this moment my cousin Helen came sailing up, like the long-necked swan she fancied herself to be. She had a distinctive swaying walk and she was exaggerating it. Although mine was the marriage in question, she wanted all the attention for herself. She was beautiful as usual, indeed more so: she was intolerably beautiful. [...] She tilted her face towards me, looking at me whimsically as if she were flirting. I suspect she used to flirt with her dog, with her mirror, with her comb, with her bedpost. She needed to keep in practice. [...]

'Never mind, little cousin,' she [Helen] said to me, patting me on the arm. 'They say he's [Odysseus] very clever. And you're very clever too, they tell me. So you'll be able to understand what he says. I certainly never could! It was lucky for both of us that he didn't win me! (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 33-34)

This is not the first time that Atwood writes about this topic: in fact, it is not the first time that Atwood writes about Helen of Troy. In the poem "Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing," Atwood provides a voice to yet another silenced female mythological character. In Greek classical literature, Helen was, for the most part, depicted and noted for her beauty: the woman who launched a thousand ships and set forward an entire war offers, through Atwood's poem, a new outlook

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Thus I missed the race itself. Odysseus won it. He cheated, as I later learned. My father's brother, Uncle Tyndareus, father of Helen [...] helped him to do it. [...] Why did Uncle Tyndareus help my future husband in this way? [...] One story has it that I was the payment for a service Odysseus had rendered to Tyndareus. When they were all competing for Helen and things were getting more and more angry, Odysseus made each contestant swear an oath that whoever won Helen must be defended by all of the others if any other man tried to take her away from the winner. In that way he calmed things down and allowed the match with Menelaus to proceed smoothly. He must have known he had no hope himself. [...] in return for assuring a peaceful and very profitable wedding for the radiant Helen, Odysseus would get plain-Jane Penelope. (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 36-37)

on her life. In this text, the ambivalence with which Atwood deals with power-relations is, again, put on display: indeed, Helen uses her beauty to manipulate the men around her, and she does it in a very conscious and deliberate way. There is an anachronism in this text, just like in *The Penelopiad*, because even though Helen is portrayed as a Homeric character, she is living in a modern world, thus creating another retelling of this story.

The world is full of women/ who'd tell me I should be ashamed of myself/ if they had the chance. Quit dancing./ Get some self-respect/ and a day job./ Right. And minimum wage,/ and varicose veins, just standing/ in one place for eight hours/ behind a glass counter/ bundled up to the neck, instead of/ naked as a meat sandwich. (Atwood, *Eating Fire* 311)

In the first part of the poem, this modern day Helen of Troy makes a statement about *how* she wants to use her body. She makes a point of not being ashamed of what she does, and goes on to further explain that it is, in fact, *her choice*: “*Exploited*, they'd say. Yes, any way/ you cut it, but I've a choice/ of how, and I'll take the money” (Atwood, *Eating Fire* 311).

The Helen we find in this poem is not too far away from the Helen portrayed in *The Penelopiad*. In fact, I would go so far as to say that her account on this poem could very well be Helen's version of the *Odyssey*, were she is the main character in Atwood's rendition of this epic. Although Helen consciously chooses how to use her body, and what to do with it, she is also aware of the risks she has to go through. Helen mentions beatings, murders and rapes, but she also mentions being so far away from this “men's world” that they could never possibly understand her, nor her motives. She mentions gods and her parentage and, indeed, the power of having a voice:

I can't hear them./ [...] I can't, because I'm after all/ a foreigner to them./ The speech here is all warty gutturals,/ obvious as a slab of ham,/ but I come from the province of the gods/ where meanings are lilting and oblique./ I don't let on to everyone,/ but lean close, and I'll whisper:/ My mother was raped by a holy swan./ You believe that? You can take me out to dinner./ That's what we tell all the husbands./ There sure are a lot of dangerous birds around. (Atwood, *Eating Fire* 313)

What is it about this representation of Helen that makes us uneasy? I would argue that we, as a society, are not yet ready to read such cruel and crude depictions about womanhood being told by a woman herself. Perhaps the Homeric Helen was easier to understand, and even feel sorry for, because her story was told from a masculine point of view and, although she did go through various perils, such as being kidnapped, having to marry at a very tender age, and never actually having a say on the decisions made upon her life, she was depicted as the most gorgeous woman on earth, with gods' blood running through her veins – which ended up being the prevalent representation of the mythological Helen throughout his-

tory. Margaret Atwood uses her poem to retell Helen's story from another point of view, one in which she is the one actor in her own life and, although very aware of what kind of impact her beauty and outward appearance have on men, she shows herself weary of this position, misunderstood both by men *and* women: "They'd like to see through me,/ but nothing is more opaque/ than absolute transparency" (Atwood, *Eating Fire* 313).

As Ruth Scodel emphasizes in *An Introduction to Greek Tragedy*, shifting perspectives and questioning points of view is fundamental when analyzing a text:

[...] when we study Greek tragedies, we do best if we constantly shift perspectives, universalizing and historicizing. This is simply an especially demanding case of what we always do when we read a story or see a play, as we both use our expectations to make sense of the experience and modify our expectations as the work unfolds (in the 'hermeneutic spiral'). (Scodel 2)

Therefore, in this poem, we can conclude that Helen does, actually, manipulate men, but she does it with a keen sense that were it not for *their* emphasis on her beauty, they themselves would not be subject to her own manipulations. In a way, she is not responsible for the manipulations: if men would stop putting the emphasis on her looks, this power-game would eventually stop. By the end of the poem, the reader is presented with a frail Helen who hides her fears and insecurities behind the veil of her beauty, hence gaining a new strength and a new voice: "You think I'm not a goddess?/ Try me./ This is a torch song./ Touch me and you'll burn" (Atwood, *Eating Fire* 313).

Not unlike this misrepresentation of womanhood, the character of Penelope in *The Penelopiad* represents a double standard of both powerlessness and power. Although there is a level of impunity with which Penelope could cope, it is through the maids' choirs that the reader is faced with Penelope's own guilt. In the same way that Atwood claims to always have been haunted by the presence/absence of the twelve maids in the *Odyssey*, so is her own rendition of Penelope. The first interruption in Penelope's retelling of her story questions the notion of power through a different perspective, and it is one of class, through the maids' choir:

We too were children. We too were born to the wrong parents. Poor parents, slave parents, peasant parents, and serf parents; parents who sold us, parents from whom we were stolen. These parents were not gods, they were not demi-gods, they were not nymphs or Naiads. We were set to work in the palace, as children; we drudged from dawn to dusk, as children. If we wept, no one dried our tears. If we slept, we were kicked awake. We were told we were motherless. We were told we were fatherless. We were told we were lazy. We were told we were dirty. [...] We were the dirty girls. If our owners or the sons of our owners or a visiting nobleman or the sons of a visiting nobleman wanted to sleep with us, we could not refuse. It did us no good to weep, it did us no good to say we were in pain. All this happened to us when we were children. If we were pretty children our lives were worse. [...] But we wanted to sing and dance too, we wanted to be happy too. As we grew



older we became polished and evasive, we mastered the secret sneer. We swayed our hips, we lurked, we winked, we signaled with our eyebrows, even when we were children [...]. (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 13-14)

This relationship between powerlessness and power, or a change of places, is not far away from the one expressed in the poem “Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing.” In fact, it is not far away from the recurring themes in Atwood’s writing. *À propos* the question of power games, Atwood emphasized in *Notes on Power Politics*:

Power is our environment. We live surrounded by it: it pervades everything we are and do, invisible and soundless, like air [...]. We would all like to have a private life that is sealed off from the public life and different from it, where there are no rulers and no ruled, no hierarchies, no politicians, only equals, free people. But because any culture is a closed system and our culture is one based and fed on power this is impossible, or at least very difficult [...]. So many of the things we do in what we sadly think of as our personal lives are simply duplications of the external world of power games, power struggles. (Atwood, “Notes” 7)

In the contemporary theatrical version of the *Odyssey*, while sharing the same space as Helen in Hades, the figures of the maids are ghost-like – their voices and chants are haunting – sometimes they take hold of the action on stage, other times they move about either behind or in front of Penelope, as if teasing the main character. In the beginning of the play, the maids come out of the audience, from different parts of the room, singing together in an evocative tone, while Penelope’s soliloquy is interrupted and she is left silenced and alone on stage, as if petrified. During the course of the play, the maids often help Penelope in her endeavors, especially before she gives birth to her son, Telemachus; when Odysseus finally returns, the maids are killed, all of them hung, in spite of Penelope’s silence. Thus, it should be of no surprise that Atwood chooses to give these characters an evocative ghoulish feature, and so, in their last appearance, they sound provocative and punishing:

You roped us in, you strung us up, you left us dangling like clothes on a line. [...] How virtuous you felt, how righteous, how purified, now that you’d got rid of the plump young dirty dirt-girls inside your head! [...] Now you can’t get rid of us, wherever you go: in your life or your afterlife or any of your other lives. [...] Why did you murder us? What had we done to you that required our deaths? You never answered that. It was an act of grudging, it was an act of spite, it was an honour killing. [...] We’re the serving girls, we’re here to serve you. We’re here to serve you right. We’ll never leave you, we’ll stick to you like your shadow, soft and relentless as glue. Pretty maids, all in a row. (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 191-193)

In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood breaks away from the canonic (and masculine) epic form, and constructs a new identity both for Penelope and the twelve maids, while not straining away from the plot of the *Odyssey*. Accordingly, the main themes of Odysseus’ departure and arrival; Penelope’s weaving of the shroud; the deaths of all

the Suitors, and the maids, at her son Telemachus' hands – once Odysseus finally returns – are repeated episodes in *The Penelopiad*. What greatly differs between these two narratives, is the point of view from which the main events are told: while the *Odyssey*'s main focus is what happens during Odysseus' adventures, in *The Penelopiad* the reader is confronted with what happens at home, during his absence.

Through the authority of having a voice, there occurs a disclosure of the feminine and of the power games between characters. However, as we have seen throughout this reading of *The Penelopiad*, it is not always easy to have and use one's voice. Interrelated with this theme, let us consider a short story which can be found in Atwood's book *The Tent*, published one year after *The Penelopiad*:

I was given a voice. That's what people said about me. [...] I nurtured it, I trained it, I watched it climb up inside my neck like a vine.

The voice bloomed. People said I had grown into my voice. Soon I was sought after, or rather, my voice was. We went everywhere together. What people saw was me, what I saw was my voice, ballooning out in front of me [...] my voice would thrive only for a certain term. Then, as voices do, it would begin to shrivel. Finally it would drop off, and I would be left alone, denuded – a dead shrub, a footnote.

It's begun to happen, the shriveling. Only I have noticed so far. There's the barest pucker in my voice, the barest wrinkle. Fear has entered me [...].

[...] Although it's begun to decay, my voice is still as greedy as ever. Greedier: it wants more, more and more, more of everything it's had so far. It won't let go of me easily.

Soon it will be time for us to go out. We'll attend a luminous occasion, the two of us, chained together as always. I'll put on its favourite dress, its favourite necklace. I'll wind a fur around it, to protect it from the drafts. Then we'll descend to the foyer, glittering like ice, my voice attached like an invisible vampire to my throat. (Atwood, *The Tent* 21-23)

Possessing an all-consuming and haunting voice, and having to speak up whenever necessary – or, conversely, knowing when to stay silent – is not easy; it is my conviction that Atwood's Penelope would be the first one to step up and claim this assumption. In the invisible space of Hades, Penelope is able to retell her story from her own point of view. New facts are added, others clarified and demystified. Most importantly, Atwood is able to create a bridge between ancient Greece and our modern world. While Penelope uses her voice and seems glad to have this opportunity, by the end of the narrative she lets the reader know that she has no intention to leave Hades because, since her death, Western society has scantily changed: "My past life was fraught with many difficulties, but who's to say the next one wouldn't be worse? Even with my limited access I can see that the world is just as dangerous as it was in my day, except that the misery and suffering are on a much wider scale. As for human nature, it's as tawdry as ever" (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 188).

As illustrated by the double standard shown here – regarding Penelope's position facing her own life, and the twelve maids' lives – there are no closed narratives

in Atwood's writing that can pinpoint exactly who is, or is not, a victim. Hence, I would like to end with Arnold E. Davidson's quote which touches upon some of the issues of power relations discussed above, and discloses a broader, more inclusive, understanding of the main themes in this paper: "How does one live in the light of what one knows – the disorder of any personal life, the injustice of society (particularly a patriarchal society as it impinges on women and a consumer society as it depletes everything), the chaos of a world intermittently at war, the larger chaos of the universe?" (Davidson 103).

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